

A LITTLE HUMOUR FROM THE MALTA FEVER COMMISSION.

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I FEEL that the title of this communication needs an explanation and perhaps an apology to the author of "The Humour of Indian Sanitation"; but it will be observed that my intention is honest. Hints have been dropped from more than one quarter that the Reports of the Mediterranean Fever Commission were too deeply scientific to appear as full reprints in our Journal. It has therefore occurred to me that I could supply some little bits of humour which might, to some extent, counterbalance the depressing effect which these reprints appear to have had.

The origin of Malta fever has been the subject of many theories, but one of the weirdest is propounded in the following letter to the *Daily Malta Chronicle* of October 21st, 1903.

"MEDITERRANEAN FEVER.

"SIR,—From the number of deaths which are attributable to the well-known Mediterranean fever from day to day, it is apparent that the disease still baffles the skill of the medical profession.

"As patients afflicted with this dreadful scourge are found to regain their health most speedily when transferred to a different region of the Earth, and as the complaint seems to originate in places adjacent to the Sea, the cause of the trouble may reasonably be attributed, I think, to the intensely bluish sheen of this fine sheet of water, and the corresponding colour of the atmosphere. This idea is not so far-fetched if it is borne in mind that the blue rays of sunlight are now known to have a most injurious effect in such diseases as small-pox. It would, however, be easy to test if there is anything in this idea, by giving a few of the fever patients a chance of recovery in a ward where the light would reach them only as filtered through glass of the colour used by photographers in their dark room lamps, say. Of course, if this peculiar fever has been known to attack blind people, then the cause must be sought for on other lines.

"My theory is that Mediterranean fever originates in a disorder of the optic nerves, caused by the superabundance of intensely blue light, accompanied by the peculiar glistening effects of the water, which effects are like occasional small currents of bright electrical fluid confusing and dimming the eyesight. This effect is most

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troublesome when the system is weakened generally, or after a bout of unusual exertion.

“*Malta,*

“METEOR.

“*October 20th, 1903.*”

If a Maltese be asked the cause of the fever, the chances are that he will loudly accuse the drainage system. Drainage and water supply waste money, and his old plan was much more comfortable, viz., cesspits and wells. These cesspits were hewn out of the soft porous rock of which Malta is almost entirely composed, and were usually situated underneath one of the living rooms. As the rock is so porous the fluid part of the sewage soaked away and a modification of the septic tank process was the result. These cesspits would perform their function for years and years without being emptied. When the sanitary authorities ordained that all new cesspits should be lined with cement they had to take precautions to prevent the energetic householder descending with a pick to crack the cement, so devoted was he to his “self-emptying” (and economical) cesspit.

It is now common property that the goat is at the bottom of most of the fever. Under the very close attention paid to the goats by the investigators the owners of the goats became restive and rebelled, and finally went on strike. They forewarned the public by issuing a Proclamation headed

“No more milk!

We can't bear it any more!!

We can't do any more!!!”

and signed, “The Vexed Maltese Milkman.”

As this wonderful Proclamation was reprinted in full in the Corps News of July, 1906, under “Notes from Malta,” I need not repeat it; but the apostrophe of the goat is quite a unique thing in the way of a public Proclamation: “Poor Maltese Goat! What a war has been waged against her! How she has been humbled all over the world as a filthy and poisonous animal!”

The following extract from a letter sent to me by one of the goatherds shows how bitter was the feeling at the time of the milkman's strike. The humour of this letter is in its “English as she is wrote.”

Extract from Letter.

“SIR,—I beg you to pardon me the liberty I taken to writing you this letter.

“SIR,—I have to inform you that the Milk Sellers has recovered that time ago I furnished you with Goat's blood and milk for the use of Medical Experiments, so it is impossible to continue selling

milk as they are all against me, and I am insulted wherever I go, beside this, I also have to spend a sum that I am not able to spend it, regards the new 'Sanitary Regulations,' not if I sell all my goats will be enough to comply with these orders.

"An answer (if possible) will obliged,

"I will remain, Sir, &c."

Of course the milkmen have suffered greatly and it is very hard on them, and legislation is needed for compensation to owners for destruction or quarantine of infected animals. But until the great mass of the people is educated up to the hard facts, and persuaded out of the idea that what was good enough for their forefathers is good enough for them, the Government will hardly see its way to initiate the much needed reforms.

Not only did the members of the Commission incur the hostility of the milkmen, but they were also the subject of scathing criticism in the local papers. The following is a copy of a letter which appeared in *The Malta*. The italics are my own. Comment is needless.

"VALLETTA,

"November 5th, 1906.

"DEAR MR. EDITOR,—In an article which appeared in the servile *Daily Malta Chronicle* (which has not even a shred of self-respect, as can easily be seen by the expressions interpolated in the same article on Malta Fever), the incompetence and levity of this ill-omened Commission has been shown—this Commission which according to the *British Medical Journal* leaves much to be desired both as regards experiments, scientific knowledge on the subject, and logical deductions.

"In fact, on reading that article it is clear that the Commission seem to ignore the fact—known even to the most stupid school boy—that the mere presence of the *Micrococcus melitensis* of Caruana Scicluna-Bruce (*sic*) in our goats' milk does not demonstrate in the least that such milk is the source of infection of the fever, which is not Maltese—*vide* the treatises of the most renowned Italian and French authors, who are the most competent. One must not run away with the idea that every microbe which finds its way into the digestive organs succeeds in infecting our miserable selves; in such a case there would not be a single man living; besides, are we not aware of the fact, expressed by all the Medical Congresses of the civilised world, that, although *the cow's milk overflows with tubercle bacilli*, the same is not a means of infection, for the reason that the bacilli are destroyed in the digestive organs and but very rarely

multiply there. In face of all these facts, well known even to those who do not belong to the medical profession, is it fair and honest on the part of *this most incompetent Commission* to declare that our goats are a source of infection, especially as ——— has declared that such infection is but rare? Is it fair to support this calumny which has caused considerable damage to our commerce with other countries far and near, by two feeble cases of very doubtful infection.

“Have not the people who are receiving such an amount of our money, which is thus being exhausted, have they no common sense? Are they not ashamed to write such ridiculous reports which show their *crude ignorance of the rudiments of bacteriology*? Do they not know that in order that an experiment shall be conclusive it must be absolute—that is to say : in order to declare that a monkey has been infected through the ingestion of milk, it is necessary that other sources of infection shall be absolutely eliminated, that the air breathed by the animal be pure, that it shall not be under the influence of other inoculations, &c.

“Why do not these bacteriologists go back to their homes and suggest to their consumptive countrymen not to drink the milk of English cows, because . . . such milk contains the bacillus of Koch?

“Why is it permitted to these people to alarm honest folk whose health has been broken by a *system of drainage introduced by their countrymen in spite of the remonstrances of the whole of the Maltese population*?

“Why, instead of *inventing Maltese fevers*, do they not suggest to their countrymen not to overtire themselves under the scorching rays of the sun for hours and hours playing the savage game called Rugby? and, immediately after, dipping in ice cold water, or drinking whisky that would burn even a stomach made of marble? These are the suggestions they should make, and not recommend us to spoil milk by boiling, which, while destroying the germs in the milk, destroys also the better qualities of our milk which has always invigorated our forefathers and our children.

“*Oh, these people! they know not what is chemistry, nor what is bacteriology.*”

Is it not a wonder that the members of the Commission, after such an indictment being hurled at them, can show their faces for shame of the exposure!

This is criticism with a vengeance and quite unanswerable. But what is one to do when confronted with a criticism of a higher

order! A certain learned Theologian, writing to the *Expository Times*, gives an example of the Higher Criticism as applied to the much vexed question of Paul's thorn in the flesh, and comes to the conclusion that the Apostle must have suffered from Malta fever.

He arranges the Scriptural evidences and the clinical symptoms of the disease in parallel columns, one against the other. Thus:—

PAUL'S INFIRMITY.	MALTA FEVER.
A stake for the flesh.	Headache, pain in joints and muscles.
Charge of fickleness.	Temporary impairment of memory.
Called a madman.	Nocturnal delirium.
Buffeting of Satan's angels.	Rheumatic-like pains and neuralgia.
Excitement of contempt and loathing.	Crippling and skin eruptions.
Constant impalement and buffeting.	Chronic pains, neuralgia, and debility.
Sentence of death in himself.	Occasional endocarditis or pneumonia.

What do our clinicians say to that for a diagnosis! I am afraid that a mere bacteriologist is not of much assistance in this case. Perhaps some of our specialists in psychology will assist; they would appear to be better able to follow the mental gymnastics of this Higher Criticism.

This communication is now longer than I had intended it to be, and I shall straightway conclude by giving extracts from a letter sent to me by the adjutant of a regiment, in reply to a request that the men be asked to collect mosquitoes and forward them to me in boxes. The men did their duty nobly, and supplied us with more specimens than we could comfortably deal with, but they evidently got good value out of the game. I am afraid that we got a very poor share of the fun—as there is little humour to be derived from the dissection of some hundreds of mosquitoes.

Extract from Letter.

“Fort —, Malta,
—, 1905.

“DEAR KENNEDY,—P. has passed your note on to me, and all our men are now running about with butterfly nets, or trying to tempt the wily mosquito with lumps of raw meat, and I've indented for a small size of mouse trap, but am doubtful if the Government will supply the necessary bait. Up to the present the bag is one, and he struggled so when our Regimental Police were effecting his capture that he had to be hit hard on the head and I'm afraid is almost unrecognisable.

“P.S.—Another capture just reported—we've put him in the guard room till your boxes arrive. He has been biting — — — and was consequently drunk and his capture was easy. Ought mosquitoes (when drunk) to have their boots removed?”

